



Vieques National Wildlife Refuge Questions and Answers

Is it true what some people say, that "The only thing that's changed is the uniforms?"

No. Although the U.S. Navy and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are both federal agencies, they have completely different missions.

The mission of the Navy is "to maintain, train and equip combat-ready Naval forces capable of winning wars, deterring aggression and maintaining freedom of the seas." The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is "to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people."

When can the community get more involved in planning the future of the refuge?

National Wildlife Refuges use a process called Comprehensive Conservation Planning (CCP).

Later this year, the CCP will begin in Vieques. In a series of public meetings with the people of Vieques, we will design a long-term plan for management of the refuge, incorporating the interests and desires of the public. We will discuss public uses such as fishing, recreation, tours, land crabbing, and opportunities for volunteering and employment. We will also discuss how Vieques National Wildlife Refuge can enhance opportunities for the eco-tourism industry in Vieques.

Is it possible that the U.S. Navy could take back land that is now part of Vieques National Wildlife Refuge? Could the Navy resume military exercises?

Theoretically, it is possible that the Navy could return, but it is not likely. The U.S. Congress would have to pass a new law that transfers land on Vieques back to the U.S. Navy, and no law of this kind is anticipated. As long as Vieques National Wildlife Refuge exists, refuge officials will do all they can to assure that there are no more military exercises.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is an agency of the Department of the Interior. Is it true that Interior deals with public security matters?

No. Although in various Latin American countries the Department of the Interior takes a key role in maintaining public security, in the United States, Interior focuses on natural resource management. The mission of the U.S. Department of Interior is "to protect and provide access to our Nation's natural and cultural heritage, and honor our trust responsibilities to Indian tribes and our commitments to island communities."

Is the refuge safe?

A. Only those areas that are completely safe will be open to the public. Areas that are contaminated or that have unexploded ordnance are considered dangerous and will be closed for public use. We will not permit public access to any area that is not certified to be free of risks to security and public health. There are signs posted that indicate the location of contaminated areas and areas where unexploded ordnance is present.

What kind of contaminants are found on the refuge and when will they be cleaned up?

Besides unexploded ordnance, possible contaminants include industrial solvents, gasoline, diesel products, solid waste and sewage. In the West End, clean up has begun. The Navy is still evaluating the clean-up strategy in the East end, so there is no definitive start-up date. But the good news is that Vieques has been proposed as a Superfund site. If it becomes one, the clean-up process will be accelerated.

Who is going to clean them up?

The U.S. Navy is responsible for cleaning up all the contaminants, including the unexploded ordnance. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Puerto Rican Board of Environmental Quality and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are coordinating with the Navy during the cleanup process.

What is the extent of off-shore hazards?

We don't know at this time. The U.S. Navy boundaries of the "Live Impact Area" that it used for training extended four miles offshore. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service does not have jurisdiction over the waters surrounding the refuge. The responsibility for regulating these waters belongs to the Puerto Rican Department of Natural and Environmental Resources.

How can the public use Vieques National Wildlife Refuge?

Because the land that the U.S. Navy transferred will be used as a National Wildlife Refuge, public access will be regulated in accordance with the National Wildlife Refuge Improvement Act. This means that protection of wildlife and natural resources will take precedence over any other use.

The CCP process will define how the refuge is managed in the long term. But for now, the refuge will be open during daylight hours so people can enjoy the following activities: hiking, bicycling, wildlife photography and observation, fishing and use of the beaches in Bahia de la Chiva and Bahia Corcho.

For public security and to protect the flora and fauna, the following activities will not be permitted at this time: entry into dangerous areas, hunting, camping, fires, horseback riding, farming and ranching.

Can we go crabbing?

Recently an area was designated where people can go crabbing. The possibility of designating other areas is being considered.

Crabs are an important part of the wildlife resources on the refuge. Unfortunately, crabs have been over-harvested in the area where the community of Vieques lives. To protect the crabs on the refuge, we will try to provide a place where they can reproduce. From there, they can disperse to other areas where crabbing is allowed. By following this plan, we can maintain a healthy population of an important resource at the refuge.

Is it possible to operate a business – like kayak tours, bus tours or birding excursions?

The National Wildlife Refuge System has a mechanism called a “Special Use Permit.” The best way of obtaining information is to call the refuge manager at 787/741 2138.